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ABSTRACT

Less than five years after his first landing in the American colonies, James McHenry, a well-education Scots-Irish immigrant, was serving with the Continental Army outside Boston (Massachusetts), and his military experience led him into a lengthy career of public service where he forcefully and consistently upheld the ideal of a strong central government. This booklet on James McHenry is one in a series on Revolutionary War soldiers who later signed the U.S. Constitution. The booklet reviews his first years in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), his military service as a physician under George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette, and his public service after the War as a Maryland representative to the Constitutional Convention and as Secretary of War under Presidents George Washington and John Adams. Personal data about McHenry and a bibliographic essay of further readings are also included. (DJC)

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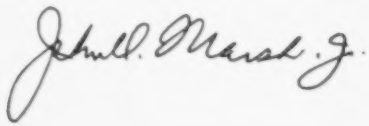
James McHenry

Soldier-Statesmen of the Constitution
A Bicentennial Series

Introduction

In September 1987 the United States commemorates the bicentennial of the signing of the Constitution. Twenty-two of the thirty-nine signers of the Constitution were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Their experiences in that conflict made them deeply conscious of the need for a strong central government that would prevail against its enemies, yet one that would safeguard the individual liberties and the republican form of government for which they had fought. Their solution is enshrined in the Constitution. The President of the United States is the Commander in Chief of the nation's military forces. But it is the Congress that has the power to raise and support those forces, and to declare war. The Founding Fathers established for all time the precedent that the military, subordinated to the Congress, would remain the servant of the Republic. That concept is the underpinning of the American military officer. These twenty-two men were patriots and leaders in every sense of the word: they fought the war, they signed the Constitution, and they forged the new government. They all went on to careers of distinguished public service in the new Republic. Their accomplishments should not be forgotten by those who enjoy the fruits of their labors. Nor should we forget the fortieth man whose name appears on the Constitution. The Secretary was the twenty-third Revolutionary veteran in the Convention, who continued his service to the nation as one of its first civil servants.

This pamphlet was prepared by the U.S. Army Center of Military History with the hope that it will provide you with the background of a great American; stimulate you to learn more about him; and help you enjoy and appreciate the bicentennial.



John O. Marsh, Jr.
Secretary of the Army

JAMES McHENRY
Maryland

James McHenry, who represented Maryland at the Constitutional Convention, was a recent immigrant to America. Like many of those who would come after, he quickly developed a strong sense of patriotism, which he then demonstrated by volunteering to defend his new homeland. Less than five years after first landing in Philadelphia, McHenry, who included himself among those he called the "sons of freedom," was serving with the Continental forces surrounding Boston. The young Irish immigrant proved to be a strong nationalist, focusing more on the concept of a united America than on loyalty to any one of the three colonies in which he had lived before the Revolution. From the beginning, this nationalistic outlook led him to see "absolute independency" as the goal of the true patriot. His experiences in the Army, including service on General George Washington's personal staff, convinced him that the only obstacles to nationhood were timidity among the citizenry and "disunion" among the states. Throughout a career of public service that lasted into the second decade of the new republic, he would forcefully and consistently uphold the ideal of a strong central government as embodied in the Constitution as the best guarantee against any such disunity or loss of national purpose in the future.

THE PATRIOT

McHenry was born into a Scots-Irish family in the province of Ulster. Son of a prosperous merchant, he received a classical education in Dublin, an education continued in the New World at the Newark Academy (later the University of Delaware). McHenry, at eighteen, had been the first of his family to immigrate. While his relatives then went about establishing a prosperous import business in the expanding port of Baltimore, McHenry maintained his independent course by turning to the study of medicine. He spent two years in Philadelphia as an apprentice to one of America's foremost physicians, Dr. Benjamin Rush. The young student quickly acquired the skills and knowledge expected of an eighteenth century doctor, but more important for the Revolutionary cause, he also received an important political education from Rush, one of Pennsylvania's leading opponents of British rule and a future signer of the Declaration of Independence.

McHenry came to accept the proposition that the breach between colonies and mother country could not be healed, and he offered his services to his

adopted land when hostilities broke out in New England in 1775. McHenry, still a civilian, joined the American forces participating in the siege of Boston. He worked in the military hospital in Cambridge as a volunteer assistant surgeon, but before long he was asked to accept the demanding assignment of surgeon in one of the hospitals being established in northern New York to care for the wounded in the wake of an abortive American attack on Canada. Before reporting for duty, however, McHenry returned to Philadelphia to collect additional medical supplies.

THE SOLDIER

Before the Continental Congress could confirm McHenry's appointment as an officer in the Hospital Department, Pennsylvania officials, probably at the suggestion of Dr. Rush, selected him to serve instead as the surgeon of a regiment recently raised in the eastern part of that colony by Colonel Robert Magaw. Once again McHenry left Philadelphia for the front, this time as a regular member of the 5th Pennsylvania Battalion.

Unlike other Pennsylvania units that were assigned to the Flying Camp, Washington's mobile reserve force stationed in the northern New Jersey area, the 5th Pennsylvania, as a regular Continental unit, reported directly to New York City. Its mission was to construct and defend Fort Washington, an American outpost near the northern end of Manhattan Island. According to plans developed in Washington's headquarters, this stronghold was to deny the British full access to the city and to the Hudson River. The plans went awry. Overwhelming British and Hessian forces under General William Howe attacked the fort from three directions on the morning of 16 November 1776. Pushing forward despite fierce resistance by the outnumbered garrison, they forced Magaw to surrender. This defeat marked the beginning of a British campaign that would drive Washington back to the Delaware River, and to Valley Forge, the lowest ebb of the Continental Army's military fortunes during the war.

McHenry missed the dramatic American victories at Trenton and Princeton that saved the patriot cause. He was one of five physicians and some 2,000 soldiers who were captured by the British at Fort Washington. After spending some time caring for sick and wounded prisoners of war, he was paroled, in accord with the rules of eighteenth century warfare, to his home while awaiting exchange. Only in March 1778 was he free to join the Continental Army again, at Valley Forge. There McHenry temporarily served with the Flying Hospital (a kind of Revolutionary War MASH) before coming to General Washington's personal attention. In May 1778 the Commander in Chief selected him to serve as assistant secretary on his staff. McHenry

Pastel, by James Sharples, Sr. (c. 1795), Independence National Historical Park Collection.

remained on Washington's staff as a volunteer without rank or pay for two and a half years. During that period he saw action in the battles of Monmouth and Springfield, New Jersey, and became a valued member of Washington's immediate "military family," along with men like Henry Knox, Alexander Hamilton, and the Marquis de Lafayette.

McHenry's lifelong friendship with the dynamic Lafayette dated from this experience. Near the end of 1780 he transferred to the Frenchman's staff, a change that led to a commission as major. He served at Lafayette's side during the climactic campaign of the war. During the winter of 1780 Washington sent his light infantry units under Lafayette south on a forced march to Virginia. Their arrival was to coincide with that of a French fleet from Rhode Island in order to surprise British forces that were disrupting logistical bases established for General Nathanael Greene's Southern Army. Although the British eluded capture, Virginia became a new theater of war when Washington left Lafayette's units in the state to reinforce local militia and sent an additional force of Pennsylvania regulars under General Anthony Wayne.

The stage was set for a major confrontation when royal troops under General Charles Cornwallis marched north into Virginia. Throughout the summer Lafayette's militia and continentals shadowed Cornwallis and, although greatly outnumbered, engaged the British in minor disruptive actions. In July, for example, McHenry participated in a skirmish at Green Springs, near Jamestown. During this period McHenry's close personal friendship with

Governor Thomas Sim Lee of Maryland also paid important dividends, for Lafayette's forces relied heavily on Maryland for logistical support, and McHenry's intercession with Lee ensured prompt delivery of materials to the Frenchman's units.

When the British established a defensive position at Yorktown, Washington saw an opportunity to win a decisive victory. He quickly moved his main army from New York, as a French fleet from the West Indies arrived to block any British escape by sea. Washington's brilliant concentration of forces trapped Cornwallis. A formal siege of Yorktown culminated with a bayonet attack on British positions during the night of 14 October. Cornwallis' surrender brought the active military phase of the war to an end.

THE STATESMAN

McHenry resigned his commission at the end of 1781 to enter Maryland politics. Elected to the state legislature, he served for thirteen years, using this forum to argue the cause of federalism. Between 1783 and 1786 he sat in the Continental Congress, and in the following year he represented Maryland at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. Although he played no leading part in the deliberations of the Convention, McHenry continued to support the call for a strong central government. His military staff training was reflected in his meticulous notes of the Convention's proceedings—notes that have proved invaluable for generations of American historians.

In 1796 President Washington once again called on his old wartime aide, this time to assume the duties of Secretary of War. McHenry, who would preside over the Army under both Washington and John Adams, was the third of seven Continental soldiers to hold that position. His immediate goal was to transform the isolated western military garrisons into an efficient and economical fighting force capable of protecting the new nation's frontiers against the Indian tribes. During the next two years he largely succeeded in regularizing military procedures, organizing the chaotic military supply system, and subordinating the military establishment to his authority as the civilian Secretary.

In 1798, however, the possibility of war with France brought the Army to a critical period in its history, when the question of establishing a permanently organized fighting force became a topic of much debate in Congress. McHenry took the lead in defending the need to establish a 20,000-man Army to meet the immediate threat. The opposition saw this "provisional" force as nothing less than a large standing army, which they considered inimical to the interests of a free people. A man of McHenry's political and military experience saw the situation differently. To refuse to take adequate military measures, he warned a generally reluctant Congress, "would be to offer up

the United States a certain prey to France." His arguments prevailed, and Congress eventually approved the creation of twelve new regiments of regulars.

Although inexperienced in the administration of large military organizations, McHenry struggled valiantly with the task of building a disciplined, professional Army, a task complicated by a separate controversy in regard to civilian control of military affairs. McHenry's dedication to strong central government led him to advocate civilian leadership, a democratic ideal held by many of the citizen-soldiers of the Revolution, including most notably George Washington. But in McHenry's case the concept was put to the practical test as newly appointed generals, including his friend Hamilton and the controversial James Wilkinson, vied to control military appointments and organizational plans for the provisional Army. His own military experience had taught McHenry the importance of the dedicated professional officer, and as Secretary he added his voice to those demanding a military academy to train officers. But his experiences in the Continental Army had also convinced him of the danger of soldiers meddling in the decisions of a democratic government. His forthright stand against his impetuous generals and their political allies not only enhanced the powers of the civilian Secretary of War but also marked McHenry's most important service to his country.

McHenry continued in office for some months after the threat of war with France ended in 1800, but disputes with Adams over the future of the Federalist Party finally made his presence in the cabinet untenable. His last years were spent in quiet retirement at his Maryland estate, "Fayetteville," named after his general at Yorktown. As a staunch Federalist, he opposed America's slide into war in 1812, although he lived to see his son follow in his footsteps as a wartime volunteeer. Ironically, the son participated in the 1814 defense of the Baltimore fort named for his father, the battle which inspired Francis Scott Key to write the "Star-Spangled Banner."

The Congress shall have Power . . .
To raise and support Armies . . . ;
To provide for organizing, arming, and disciplining, the Militia . . . ;

ARTICLE I, Section 8.

Personal Data

BIRTH: 16 November 1753, at Ballymena, County Antrim, Ireland
OCCUPATION: Doctor and Merchant
MILITARY SERVICE:
Continental Army—6 years
Highest Rank—Major
PUBLIC SERVICE:
Continental Congress—4 years
Secretary of War—4½ years
DEATH: 3 May 1816, at "Fayetteville," Baltimore County, Maryland
PLACE OF INTERMENT: Westminster Presbyterian Churchyard, Baltimore, Maryland

Further Readings

The most comprehensive account of McHenry's life and public service remains B. C. Steiner's *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry* (1907). For a more modern treatment of the subject, see William G. Bell's *Secretaries of War and Secretaries of the Army* (1982) and M. Howard Mattsson-Boze's "James McHenry, Secretary of War, 1796-1800" (1965 doctoral dissertation). McHenry's own *A Sidelight on History* was privately published for the first time in 1931, and his personal papers are located in the Library of Congress and the Maryland Historical Society. Some books that place McHenry's services in the context of the times include Sol Bloom's *The Story of the Constitution* (1937), Alexander DeConde's *The Quasi-War* (1966), Don Higginbotham's *The War of American Independence* (1971), Merrill Jensen's *The Making of the Constitution* (1979), and Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword* (1975).

Cover: *Scene of the Signing of the Constitution of the United States*, by Howard Chandler Christy, courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.

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